

D&D Fiction

Oroon Rising, Part 3

by Ed Greenwood



Chapter 3: Last of the Nine

Two robed and hooded figures that had once been men sat facing each other across a gleaming table. The only sound in their grand chamber was the faint singing of their scores of magics. Though both lacked eyeballs, their gazes were locked on each other, cold and calmly desperate.

A finger in which revealed bone gleamed yellow-brown made the tiniest of gestures, bidding the other sitter to begin.

“All time for strife between us is past,” Kadreth hissed in response, his voice—as always—a wet, somehow slimy slithering. The magics of his mask would avail but little against a mighty lich-wizard, so he pulled it from the crawling, restless writhing that was his face and set it on the table before him.

An errant tomb-worm, still clinging to its curved inner surface, made haste to scramble back to join the writhing thousands of its brethren that made up Kadreth’s body. That was happening more and more, lately. Worse than that, he was starting to leave a trail of dead, desiccated worm-husks in his wake—and that had never happened before.

“Indeed,” Brethniir agreed, his sepulchral voice as deep—and yet as hollow—as ever. His gray face was little more than scraps of withered flesh clinging to his skull, his lips quite gone. His bared, constant grin and two cold, twinkling stars of eyes made him look crazed.



Or rather, Kadreth thought, more crazed than he truly was.

“There is barely time left to us for trust,” the lich added, “yet trust there must be between us, else we have only time enough left to share doom.”

The Worm That Walks managed to avoid sighing. Did all liches speak with such grandiose verbosity? “Yes,” he agreed simply, leaning forward across the mirror-smooth table.

The lich nodded, gesturing with a high-skeletal hand for him to continue. “So let us proceed. Your researches—?”

“Only confirm what we both already know. The spell-wars of the Taelarr sundered and threw down not only Taeltorntar, but all the underways linking Staelghast with deeper caverns. The magic we seek—if it survives at all—lies in the tombs of Staelghast.”

“We know they had ways to immortality,” Brethniir murmured. “Glasnur, Raerivel... Temistra...”

Kadareth nodded, tomb-worms slithering hastily to cling to their fellows. “Would quite likely have lived forever, had they not been destroyed. None ever showed signs of frailty or... weakness of the body.”

There was a little silence as the two archmages stared at each other, not speaking of their own small yet ever-more-frequent failings. Their bodies were beginning to fail, driving home the cold truth that neither wormdom nor lichdom were roads to true immortality—only to long, long years that ended in crumbling collapse.

Ended very soon, now.

Unless the secrets that Glasnur, Raerivel, and the handful of other Ageless Wizards had enjoyed were buried with the mightiest archwizards of lost and fallen Taeltorntar in the monster-guarded tombs of Staelghast—and a certain lich and worm that walks found the right tombs and recovered the right things from them very soon.

Or rather, their tools did the finding and recovering.

“The Proud Slayers—can there be a more pompous name?—are our best,” Brethniir sighed, “yet they fail. Repeatedly.”



“So we must raise them and send them back once more,” Kadareth replied, his slithering tones holding something that was weary, or bitter, or both. “Repeatedly, if need be. What other means have we?”

Before, the Nine had made furious war upon each other with the adventuring bands they’d sent into Staelghast, not daring—after the fate of Tolamnar, first of the Nine to fall—to venture into its depths themselves. Kadareth and Brethniir had hurled spells at Tolamnar as gleefully as the others, succeeding only in awakening the wards and backlash shieldings that now protected the chambers of Staelghast against hostile magics from afar. Yet Tolamnar had died that day, trying to force his way through the spell-defenses of an entombed Taelarr archwizard. His most powerful spells had crumbled before patient dooms so powerful that the rest of the Nine had winced as they watched him torn apart.

Torn apart more easily than infamous Raerivel had been, years before—and that death had taken the mightiest spells of fourteen archmages to accomplish, five of them spending their lives in the doing.

Since Tolamnar’s passing, none of the surviving Nine had set boot in Staelghast. Capable adventurers had been plucked from afar, assembled into teams, and cajoled and spell-coerced to explore Staelghast, deadly room after passage, trap after blood-drenched trap.

When these venturers fell, the spells of their patron mages brought the “walking meat” back to life again, or re-created their blasted or mangled bodies, to send them into the underways once more.

At first, each wizard had used their band of adventurers against those belonging to others of the Nine. The battles and betrayals in Staelghast had been wild and bitter and slaughterhouse-vicious. Years of such butchery had sent some of the original adventurers insane beyond mending, or left them too butchered for spells to make whole and hale.

Nor did the ranks of the Nine stand unscathed. Two died when longevity spells backfired, stripping them to withered and dead skeletons in mere moments, and a third crumbled and fell apart when his bid for lichdom went wrong. Two more turned to each other for comfort—and when despair took them both, by agreement spell-slew each other.

Now Haedrath the Matchless was gone, and the Nine had become only two.

The time that had run out for seven all-too-mortal archwizards was fast running low for Kadreth Whitecloak and Brethniir of the Brazen Tower. Wherefore they now leaned toward each other across the mirror-smooth table and murmured urgently.

“Your trials failed?” asked Kadreth, his hiss barely a question.

“I’d have swift-shouted you if they’d succeeded,” the lich replied bitterly. “The backlash toppled my largest tower and almost struck me down, right through my strongest shieldings. As always: teleportation into Staelghast is impossible, and we can only farscry chambers and passages in which our walking meat leave the eye-tokens. Everywhere else: the mists, as before, no matter how much power I pour into the scrying. I can see the hammerfall trap because the fat warrior—Forn? Forntar?—still lies in it with his pouch of tokens, but I can’t see the thrusting blades they found a day back beyond the Lion Door, because none of them had the wits to leave a token there. Everything is as before.”

“So we go on. As before. Raise the walking meat, instruct them, and send them in. What else is left to us?”

“What else indeed? Time draws down; we must choose only the best, not try to send and use all the meat. They... work not well together, even as we Nine did not.”

“Agreed. I name Jallana and Tarlastra. Lockilgar?”

“He amuses me, as he does the two of them—and has learned not to rush ahead where his overbold tongue is wont to carry him, without their agreement. And they are our steadiest and sturdiest. The three of them, yes.”

“Not Ransur?”

“His skills are considerable, perhaps better than the rest. Yet he cannot succeed alone, and his habitual treacheries, in my measuring, can no longer be afforded.”

“He fails to help his fellows until they are weakened and he has power over them. Always. He steals from them when he can, and habitually conceals what he sees and hears, even when this endangers them all. Always. Agreed: not Ransur.”

“Three. Just three, then. Sent where? Manypillars again? To head for the cluster of tombs beyond?”

“Speed, Brethniir, speed. We can feel the great magic that pulses beyond the Bowl-Idol from here. They must win past the Idol, or we taste oblivion.”

“The Idol has claimed them so many times before,” the lich said grimly. “Them and all the meat we’ve ever commanded, all of us. How will they prevail, when they’ve failed so many times before?”

“Somehow. Or we fail, and fade, and this will all have been for naught. Lord of the Brazen Tower, we are out of time.”

The lich spoke no reply, but his body answered for him. A bone in the smallest digit of his left hand gave way, and the finger broke off and skittered across the mirror-smooth table.

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